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ABSTRACT

This report suggests some of the implications for those who are teaching young children or for those who might be involved in designing language programs. It is based on the results of a 1968-69 study to determine the effects of instruction over one school year on the language behavior of disadvantaged prekindergarten children in public schools and nondisadvantaged private nursery school children. The Day Language Screen was used to assess each child's pre- and postinstruction ability on receptive and expressive aspects of standard English grammar along with his ability to use attributes in describing selected objects. The implications for instruction relative to language differences are that language program development should emphasize helping children develop increasingly complex ways of using language to express thoughts carefully, as an aid in problem solving, reasoning, and in grouping real and abstract phenomena rather than focusing on teaching the grammar of American English. Specific language skills need to be identified and taught, and children must be given an opportunity to use these skills so related to total development. (JS)

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Language: A Generator of Meaning

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It seems unreasonable to doubt any longer the relationship between the use of language and optimum intellectual development. Our language is so much more than a social arbiter; language is an aid to the highest levels of intellectual functioning. It is the chief means by which we can share with others past experiences, abstract concepts, beliefs, and hypotheses about what will come. Yet, all too much of what takes place during language arts instruction in school is only concerned with the mechanics of language and not its use in conveying meaning or reasoning.

Today, in "the early childhood language instruction epoch", almost without exception decisions about curricula for young children are characterized by agreement on the absolute necessity for including language development programs. Unfortunately, in all too many instances the decisions are based on rhetoric rather than reasoned and articulate statements about the role and nature of language development in the total education of children. Over and over data has been gathered pointing out with clarity significant differences in language behavior between higher and lower status children. Most of these data, however, dealt with factors such as size of vocabulary, length of utterance, and the degree to which sentences used conformed to a standard English grammar. These data were quantifiable but really did not speak to the question of the relationship between language and intellectual ability, or more importantly, the ways in which poor and not poor children

differ in their use of language. It does not seem enough to merely recognize the importance of language in our lives and consequently place emphasis on its development. It would seem that the most reasonable way to develop language programs for any child would be to begin with a clear understanding of the level of language maturity of the child and the ways in which he is using language as a tool for communicating and thinking.

Syntax and Meaning in Language

Several assumptions have been made about the nature and relationship of language to both intellectual development and success in school. These assumptions should be discussed albeit briefly.

Language is a tool. It has a logic or order consisting of a series of seemingly separable skills. A child learns that a sentence must have meaning for it to communicate and that the structure or syntax if used appropriately contributes significantly to meaning. A child who says "drink what I a" will learn that his structure confuses rather than transmits meaning. He will also learn that "I want a drink" not only is unambiguous but can be used as a foundation for more elaborate sentence development.

By the same token, learning to use modifiers, prepositions, and conjunctions can contribute measurably to a child's sense of control over the meaning of his sentences. Language instruction should be designed so that the child is ever aware that he is learning more and more above ways in which he is gaining control over both the structure and vocabulary of his language. This can best be achieved when the child has assurance that his teacher perceives language as a tool and not a means by which one is judged good or not so good.

Data about the language differences between economically different populations although clearly established did not seem to address the key issues. We were convinced that there were far more subtle differences between children

who failed and those who did not. In 1968-69 a study was designed and executed to answer some of these questions.

The Study of Language Behavior

The study from which the implications that follow were drawn included [redacted] children selected from public pre-kindergarten classes for disadvantaged children and some private nursery schools serving an advantaged white population in Atlanta, Georgia. A major interest was the investigation of the effects of instruction over one school year on the language behavior of the children. Specifically, we were interested in identifying any language differences that might exist between advantaged and disadvantaged children and studying the effects of instruction on these differences.

The Day Language Screen was used to assess each child's pre- and post-instruction ability on receptive and expressive aspects of standard English grammar as well as his ability to use attributes in describing selected objects. (Day, 1970) The Language Screen generates data that can be used in making judgements about the relative level of language maturity of children. The Screen should give a clearer indication of the ways in which a child uses language as a tool for manipulating and describing his perceptions of selected phenomena.

Differences in both syntactical and semantic language behavior between the advantaged and disadvantaged children were found that suggested a difference in the level of language maturity between the two groups. Part I of the Language Screen assesses syntactical skill. The advantaged children obtained significantly higher scores both before and after instruction than did the disadvantaged children. However, both the black and white disadvantaged children obtained significantly larger gain scores than did the advantaged group.

Part II of the Language Screen measures three levels of a child's development in the use of language in describing phenomena. The way in which a child describes objects reflects, in important ways, his ability to use language in conveying explicit meaning. As a child describes a toy turtle, for example, it is possible to determine with some certitude whether a child is able to use concepts such as color, size, texture, and number. Furthermore, the Language Screen provides data about the ways in which the child uses language to develop concepts. A child who can say that, "the turtle has four legs" is using language in a more mature way than the child who would say that the turtle has "a leg and a leg and a leg and a leg."

Before instruction, the advantaged children were more apt to tell the examiner the descriptive attributes of an object; the disadvantaged child would be more apt to tell one the function of an object. This was no longer the case after instruction. Significant gain scores were produced by the disadvantaged black children. They were now describing objects using adjective and nouns significantly more often than they had before instruction.

The final report of the study contains a detailed description of the procedures and analyses of data. (Nurss and Day, 1970 & 1971) The study has important implications for those who are teaching young children or would design language programs. The purpose of this paper is to suggest some of the implications from the study.

Implications for Instruction

1. Language Differences. Much has been said about the language differences between lower and higher status children and between black and white children. It has been suggested by linguists that black children, in particular, use language that is unique and grammatically different from standard American English. (Baratz and Shuy, 1969) This position has resulted in the develop-

ment of programs of instruction where English is taught as if it were a foreign language, using the oral-aural approach. Language laboratories, especially for older children, have been commonplace. Others have said that the key language difference between children can be attributed to difference in amount of vocabulary and use of standard syntactical rules. (Templin, 1957) Programs build on this thesis tend to emphasize vocabulary acquisition, correction of errors in pronunciation and grammar or a change in the child's dialect.

Although it is impossible to conclude with certainty, it appears from our study that the language difference between status-race groups is a difference in level of language maturity or degree of development. The disadvantaged black and white child seemed to be developing a grammar similar to that of the advantaged child; there was a significant lag, however, in the degree to which the grammar had developed. Without question, there were grammatical differences between the advantaged and disadvantaged children. These differences seemed to suggest that the disadvantaged child had not yet gained command of certain grammatical contrasts, such as plural forms, and not that he had developed a language whose structure was distinctly different from the structure of standard American English. In other words he had mastered one grammatical variation of American English and was quite capable and ready to continue developing the schools' grammatical system when given sufficient instruction.

Those educators responsible for language program development should probably be very careful in making judgments about the need for focusing mainly on teaching the grammar of American English. Emphasis might better be placed on helping children develop increasingly more complex ways of using language to express thoughts carefully and as an aid in problem solving, reasoning, and in grouping real and abstract phenomena.

2. Language Instruction Helps. One of the most important findings was the very significant gain in language development made by the disadvantaged children over the instructional year. Furthermore, the usual sex differences did not appear; boys were as good as girls. Comparison of pre- and post-test results of Part I of the Language Screen, which measures use of standard American English syntax, revealed that the disadvantaged white and black children showed more growth during the year than did the advantaged children. In the fall the advantaged children had an average score of 31.98 out of a possible 46. The white disadvantaged children scored 25.43 and the average for the black disadvantaged children was 25.02. After the school year of instruction, the advantaged children scored 36.92, the white disadvantaged 34.53 and the black disadvantaged 34.75.

The gain scores for Part II of the Language Screen were in a direction similar to those of Part I. Pre-test scores were: advantaged 11.44, white disadvantaged 7.55 and black disadvantaged 8.89. The post-test score for the advantaged group was 13.02. The disadvantaged white children scored 10.45 but the disadvantaged black children had an average score of 15.32, higher than the advantaged children. Clearly, daily instruction helped. One can conjecture about what might happen if language instruction had begun at an earlier age or were to be continued for two or more years.

3. Language as a Tool. During language arts instruction too much concern is given to the mechanics of our language and too little with its use in reasoning or conveying meaning. The attitude of the teachers in the experimental program in Atlanta was that language must be used and emphasis should be given to increasing clearer and more efficient ways in which it can be used. Children were taught ways in which the basic structure of the sentence could be expanded to include adjectives and prepositions, for example, which would bring it greater meaning and specificity. The

sentence "this is a ball" could eventually become "this yellow ball is on the green box."

4. Middle-Class Children and Language. Language for all children develops over time and with experience. Nothing points this fact up better than the degree to which differences between advantaged and disadvantaged children were reduced during the year. Yet, it is entirely possible that we educators have developed the attitude that because the middle-class child does school language tasks so well he has no need for instruction. Why spend time teaching language to children who are the norm against which all other children are judged? The question can become a trap.

Suggesting language instruction for all children is based on the belief in the relationship between language behavior and intellectual development. Suffice it to say, that if a primary objective of the school is to develop skills by which we come to know more and more about our world, then we must include language development instruction in our curricula for it is an invaluable tool in achieving this goal.

Casual instruction likely becomes no instruction. All children aged 4 - 7 or 8 are in the process of developing their language. The schools could and should assist all children in achieving the limits of the use of language as a tool for thought.

5. Use of Language. Language development programs must include an emphasis on the expressive use of language. Children must be given ample opportunity to use their language in gaining ability to describe, classify, or speculate about phenomena and ideas.

Language instruction should encourage the child to learn ways in which he can form thoughts and communicate their meaning to others. This cannot happen when children spend most of their time either listening to adults talk or answering simple yes-no questions. We have all witnessed teachers who have

taught the meaning and use of prepositions without ever requiring a child to use the preposition in a complete thought. Assurance that a child understood "under" may be assumed by watching him place a crayon under a box after being asked. But, we have not given the child an opportunity to use his language or to produce language. The two skills are not the same, as Brown has pointed out, and production is clearly the most difficult to the language tasks. Understanding or receptive language skills are important and their place in the curriculum should not be diminished. Reading comprehension, for example, seems to be largely a function of understanding oral sounds. More and more, however, teachers should be asking children to, "tell me where the crayon is" after it has been placed under the box, rather than, as so often happens now, asking the child "is the crayon under the box?"

6. Specify Goals Clearly. Instructional and behavioral goals must be specified for the instruction of young children. Teachers need to tell the child before instruction that they are going to teach him the names for various shapes and show him ways in which these names can be used; then to proceed to teach the names, ask the child to participate, and ask him to perform the task. Thus, the teacher and child will know immediately when behavior is made manifest; both will know that it has been learned; and the child can demonstrate what he has learned (or been taught) to others with clarity and assurance. A child should learn that language use develops with practice in much the same way roller skating develops with practice. Most of all, however, the child must have absolute assurance that you as teacher are using your language as best you can to communicate clearly what it is you would have him learn.

7. Daily Small Group Instruction. A major finding of our study in Atlanta was that the lower status children were able to demonstrate the ability to transfer what they had been taught to the open-ended testing situation. Further-

more, the degree of fluency of the disadvantaged children increased sharply.

Daily instruction dealt with such things as teaching specific colors, shapes, singular and plural endings, relative size and ways in which objects can be grouped. There was both continuity and a sequence to instruction and it was assumed that with appropriate reinforcement the skills would be retained and transferred.

Part II of the Language Screen was, among other things, a test of the degree to which the children were able to make use of adjectives, prepositions, and logical deductions as well as concepts in describing objects. The large gain scores reported in the section on language differences indicate rather clearly the degree to which the children were able to transfer what had been learned in the instructional group.

One of the reasons for this significant change in language behavior must be attributed to regular daily instruction in groups never larger than seven. Teachers were asked to provide small group instruction in the use of various language skills each day. The length of the lesson would be largely determined by the behavior of the children. If an object were to teach the children shapes or color, size or location, or even simple deductive statements, teachers gathered the children in the same groups each day and proceeded to teach the skills directly. If for any reason the lesson was not being received well by the children, the teacher was instructed to stop. If the children seemed to have had enough after five minutes or fifteen the teacher called a halt and moved into another activity.

Summary

Language is learned behavior. Like most other forms of human behavior it develops over time. Also, as in the case of other behavior, it is influenced by experience. Regardless of one's innate language ability, models are necessary to produce and use language in a meaningful way.

Differences in language behavior, both in syntax and meaning, found between advantaged and disadvantaged children are more than likely a function of the degree to which the children have been taught the use of language. All children use language. This is clear. Some children are taught early that their language must be clear and lucid for meaningful communication. Other children learn that language is not necessarily the chief means by which we communicate and furthermore that language communication can be vague and general. Meaning can be open to interpretation; something less than specificity is tolerated. Unfortunately, the child who has not been required to use language with clarity is probably also the child who deviates most from the norm of standard American English. Perhaps this is why it is possible to find so many schools that emphasize dialect differences and grammar rather than ways in which language can be used to generate meaning.

Programs that treat language differences by drilling on vocabulary or the grammar of standard American English are more than likely not contributing in any appreciable way to the resolution of the differences. Specific language skills need to be identified, taught, and children must be given an opportunity to use these skills so related to total development. Any program that does less than this is not meeting the challenge.

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